

Review of the ESSENCE on Health Research Initiative

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This paper summarises the findings of a review of the ESSENCE for Health Initiative (*Enhancing Support for Strengthening the Effectiveness of National Capacity Efforts*), established in 2008. This is the first performance review of the initiative, colloquially referred to as ESSENCE@7. The purpose of the review is to take stock of ESSENCE achievements and challenges over time, with a view to reflecting on learning points for moving forward.

The review used largely qualitative methods, key informant interviews and document content analysis. The evaluation framework was built around three main thematic blocks: *Structure & Composition, Performance and Governance*. Standard OECD/DAC criteria were applied to the examination of performance.

The review was supported by a high level of co-operation from ESSENCE leadership (Chair, Steering Committee Members and the Secretariat), with views on a range of review pertinent topics collected from a purposeful sample of the ESSENCE membership. Key informant interviews achieved an 80% response rate.

The **main conclusions** are explained and grounded in the findings of the review. It is worth highlighting that ESSENCE is positively valued by the majority of its members because it provides a platform for relationship and network building across health research funders. Whilst stronger inter agency relations may be arguably considered a ‘soft’ outcome, it should not be underestimated. Going forward, the benefits of co-ordination achieved by ESSENCE require stronger prospective and systematic capture. This review may have underestimated the achievements of ESSENCE over time, due to limitations in data availability, and the natural recall and accuracy challenges associated with a retrospective review. Also, whilst areas for strengthening ESSENCE have been identified, the need for strengthening should *not* overshadow the fundamental need for, and role played by, ESSENCE in donor co-ordination for health research.

Whilst risking over simplification, the table below provides a summary of key review findings in relation to questions posed in the Terms of Reference. The main body of the report explores the evidence and basis for these remarks.

Review Questions with Summary Answers

Review Questions	Summary Response
To what degree has ESSENCE achieved its goal of coordination and harmonization of health research? What were the barriers or opportunities that the initiative encountered or missed? Within the resources allocated, do achievements exceed expectations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited <i>overt</i> achievement of this objective but strong anecdotal comment that the ESSENCE initiative has contributed to intelligence that informs programming across organisations. The trust and positive inter-personal relations amongst members contributes to quick and easy access to information in ‘real time.’• The ESSENCE best practice guidance documents were identified by respondents as important for building a shared understanding and consensus, amongst donors, on key topics of H&A for research capacity strengthening.• Stronger prospective capture of networking benefits is required.• Different member expectations about what H&A

Review Questions	Summary Response
	<p><i>means</i> in relation to ESSENCE were identified – this dilutes group effectiveness and cohesion but is a solvable challenge. Clarity about ESSENCE and its role in terms of H&A for health research is required.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outputs in terms of meetings and best practice documents are in line with inputs. This is largely a subjective judgement.
<p>How should the goals of ESSENCE be modified based on seven years of experience?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be more thematically and geographically specific. An updated statement of ESSENCE's <i>primary purpose</i> with a reduced scope of objectives (assuming a continuation of comparable inputs) is required, to strengthen initiative focus and performance effectiveness. Options are provided in the report. The merit of a primary focus on research capacity building, particularly normative standard setting for donors and counterpart recipients seems logical.
<p>What are key lessons learned? Are there some best practices?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENCE is valued by its members – it has a lot of support and addresses an important gap in co-ordination amongst research funders. • Be realistic in terms of scope and scale. • Be inclusive – stronger communication required within ESSENCE from 'top' to 'bottom' of organisational structure. This includes a shared group view and understanding of mission and key objectives. • Modest further investment to support the Secretariat could achieve greater dividends in terms of driving the agenda of the network. • ESSENCE is well placed to build on its credentials, its full potential has yet to be realised. There is a clear co-ordination need; and strong good will, trust and a spirit of co-operation amongst members. • Strengthening the vehicle via which country counterpart 'voices' input is important.
<p>Are the approaches ESSENCE uses appropriate and effective for the tasks it undertakes and the goals it desires to achieve? For example, did policy dialogue amongst members, development and dissemination of good practice documents, and country pilots help achieve the goals of the initiative?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The model of 'piggy backing' ESSENCE membership meetings onto key scientific and other relevant meetings is efficient in terms of time and money, and members like it. However, an episodic standalone meeting (with frequency self-determined) could be considered for more targeted, active and inclusive attendance. • The need for stronger communication exchange channels with the broader ESSENCE membership, plus more systematic capture of network benefits and achievements has been highlighted already.

Review Questions	Summary Response
What could ESSENCE do more of or less of?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key points communicated above – repetition avoided
Is the governance structure fit for purpose?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes <i>in principle</i> but operational improvements required – e.g. systematically taking and circulating minutes in SC and member meetings; adhering to a cycle of annual work plan development and reporting; take active steps to encourage new participants and representation at the SC level of the network. The benefits of active succession planning were highlighted.

The following conclusions are drawn in response to key findings:

- Conclusion 1: ESSENCE is valued by its members and appears to contribute to consensus building and *informal* co-ordination amongst research funders
- Conclusion 2: There is a strong and urgent need to re-define the primary mission and purpose of ESSENCE as there is not a shared group view, which dilutes member satisfaction and initiative performance. Options to inform discussion and decision making are provided in the report.
- Conclusion 3: ESSENCE is arguably ‘punching below’ its potential weight given major funders of health research are members. Balanced against this, there is the need to be realistic given modest resources. In short, a re-appraisal of *scale* is required.
- Conclusion 4: Simple measures will strengthen the governance and implementation of ESSENCE initiatives. There are weaknesses with the unsystematic use of common management, planning and transparency processes. Much of this is explained by Secretariat support being stretched too thinly. However, governance leadership has a collective responsibility to ensure basic processes are adhered to.
- Conclusion 5: Steps are required to safeguard sustainability. This principally refers to financial and leadership (succession planning) matters. Options for reducing financial vulnerability are suggested.
- Conclusion 6: There is a need to demonstrate and communicate the value of ESSENCE more effectively, i.e. ESSENCE needs to be more proactive and systematic at recording and tracking its own achievements.